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# On Thin Ice: Technology and Controversy in the National Hockey League

ENZO MINICOZZI

The Montreal Forum crowd groaned in anger and misery through the humid, ice-fogged air. They couldn't believe their eyes or ears as the stadium announcer gave the score of the game over the screechy intercom: "The New York Ranger goal, his thirteenth of the year, scored by, Andy Bathgate." Their team – the precious, proud team of Montreal, the Canadiens – were losing to the New York Rangers. Toe Blake, the famous coach of the Canadiens, could only watch in disgust as his "Habs" (their nickname) couldn't even muster up three passes in a row without losing the puck to a Ranger player. He watched again as his Canadiens gave up another breakout play to the Rangers, who were now on the offensive and hungry for another goal to add to their 2-0 lead.

Once again it was Bathgate, the sniper who put away the last goal for the Rangers with a nifty wrist shot from just outside the left face-off circle. Enter Jacques Plante, the stylish, flashy, and cat-like goaltender of the Montreal Canadiens. Without his heroics early in the game, the Canadiens would have been down by at least five goals at this point instead of two. Plante saw Bathgate coming through the sweat that streamed down his forehead and into his eyes. His vision was slightly blurred by a collage of blue Ranger jerseys in front of the net, and his concentration was slightly altered by the strong aroma of leather that seeped from his equipment like gas from a pipe. Plante saw Bathgate wind up and fire a blistering shot at the net. Plante tried to protect himself, but it was too late. The puck Andy Bathgate had fired like a cannon off his stick struck Jacques Plante dead on his upper cheekbone, knocking him flat on his back. The whistle blew as the players crowded around the now fallen Plante. Blood poured from his face like water from a faucet as he was helped into the dressing room.

With medical conditions as limited as they were those days in the National Hockey League, the only thing that the doctors could do was to clean the wound as best they could and then stitch it up. And because of his importance, Plante had to return to the game, no matter what. At serious risk due to the injury he had just suffered, Plante reached into his locker and took out the first technological controversy in

National Hockey League history, the goalie mask. Plante returned from the dressing room and onto the ice with mixed reactions from the crowd, the majority of them negative. But he did return, and the boos were turned into cheers as Montreal stormed back and won the game 3-2. It was a day that would change the game forever and bring it into a new age.

Afterwards Plante was ridiculed for wearing the mask, and at that time goalies were jeered and labeled as cowards for even thinking about wearing one. Plante was even blasted in the newspapers by his coach, Toe Blake. But Plante had enough career bruises and stitches all over his face to justify his motives. He said, "If you jump from an airplane without a parachute, is that considered an act of bravery" (Fischler 110)? With these remarks and his knack for defying the principles, Plante set himself at odds with the management and culture of the game. The date was November 1, 1959. He was one goalie on one team. Today, nearly forty years later, every single goaltender in all levels of hockey wears a mask.

Plante's first mask was made of a plexiglass-like material. Unfortunately, this often caused problems of fogging and light reflection. Plante added to this style mask and developed a fiberglass model that molded to his face. This was standard in the league into the late 1960s, and was used by such unheralded NHL goalies as Terry Sawchuck, Roy Edwards, and Gilles Meloche. The masks changed in the 1970's and 80's into more cage-like versions of a baseball catcher's mask. Today, masks are the safest they've ever been, combining state-of-the-art material and safety features. Protection covers all parts of the head including the neck and ears. Plante revolutionized the goalie position for future times, but since that revolution, a host of technological problems have emerged in the NHL.

Technology has affected all aspects of the game of hockey both on the ice and off. In a recent article in *Sports Illustrated*, E.M. Swift offered some convincing insights into the goaltending of this past season and how goaltenders are dominating the game and breaking the records of the great goalies just mentioned in the previous paragraph. As Smith said, "Goaltending in the NHL is undergoing a revolution, one that almost seamlessly is changing the way the position is played and heralds a new golden age of goaltenders . . . Any way you cut down the angle, last season the masked bandits between the pipes dominated the game" (Swift 60). Swift went on to describe the achievements of Buffalo Sabres' goalie Dominik Hasek, who stopped 93% of the shots he faced last year. Hasek was also named MVP of the league, the first goalie to achieve such a mark since the famous Jacques Plante. Martin Brodeur of the New Jersey Devils allowed a 1.88 "Goals Against Average" (GAA), the lowest since 1972, and his 10 shutouts were the most in twenty years. "Save" percentages have also gone up. In 1983, when the statistic was first kept, only one goalie had a percentage of .900 or better. Last season, 31 goalies met that mark, led by Hasek with .930.

These statistics have stymied many analysts, and have brought up many questions. Most important of these issues is that with better goaltending, the actual goalscoring

of the league has gone down over the last decade. This all goes back to the game's evolution and technological improvement. Today off-season training and equipment are very sophisticated, particularly in the weight-lifting area; the players are bigger, and given better nutrition and dieting, they are healthier and faster as well. This has changed the game, and the goalies have changed with it.

With such big players, the ice surface has gotten a lot smaller. This forces teams to play more defensive hockey – and this allows less shots on goal and cuts down on scoring chances. According to the *Ottawa Citizen*, current Montreal goalie Jocelyn Thibault blames this defensive style on how the game's changed:

All the teams are playing 1-2-2 defenses and using the 'trap.' That's the big difference. You don't see too many wide-open teams. Even Colorado (defending Stanley Cup champion). They have a lot of offensive talent, but they try to keep the shots on goal down. It may be boring and the fans don't like it, but, if you don't do it, you lose (Hickey 33).

His teammate, fellow goalie Andy Moog, added, "It's the style of the 90's. I also think that goaltenders are better today, and that players are better defensively in one-on-one situations" (Hickey 33).

This style of play has created many confrontations between players and goaltenders within the goal area. Due to the lack of scoring chances, players attempt to jam at loose pucks in the "crease" (a marked off section where goaltenders are now "protected"), or to create them by hitting goaltenders. This has given rise to two new rules. The first disallows any contact with the goalie anywhere on the ice. This allows the goalie to freely play the puck, particularly behind his net, without any risk of contact, or else a penalty will be called. The league's general managers are complaining that the goalies can now act as "third" defensemen in handling the puck, and the game is slowed down. It is possible that next year a rule will be passed disallowing goalies to play the puck behind the net in order to increase scoring.

The second and most controversial rule over the past two seasons states that if any part of an opposing player's body is in the crease, before a shot on goal is taken, and the shot goes in, the goal will be disallowed. If a teammate takes a shot, and an inch of his skate blade is within the opposite side of the crease area when the shot goes in, the goal will be disallowed – even if he didn't make any contact with the goalie.

This causes many stoppages in play after goals because the opposing team can request a video review to see if an opposing player was indeed in the crease. This rule has angered many players and cost a lot of teams important games last year and into this season. For example, in last year's playoffs between the New York Rangers and New Jersey Devils, the Devils had two potential game tying goals waved off in the middle games of a seven game series. Those disallowed goals dropped the Devils to a 3-1 game deficit and they would eventually lose the series in five, four games to one. The goals were disallowed even though the player was in no contact with the goalie.

The referees and goal judges had to follow the rules.

The whole idea was to protect the goalies, but what it really did was to allow them too much freedom. If a goalie wants to risk leaving his crease, he should be considered fair game by the rest of the players. And the rule should be changed about players in the crease when a goal is scored. The only way a goal should ever be disallowed is if the player distracts a goalie by making intentional contact with him.

In addition to the problems involving goaltenders, there has been a very deep scar in the National Hockey League this decade concerning concussion injuries resulting from hard body checks between players. This issue was recently discussed by Kevin Allen of *USA Today*:

Players hear whispers about Kariya's future being jeopardized because of a concussion. They see Rob Niedermayer out for the season. Pat Lafontaine announced last week that his season is over because of his sixth concussion, suffered when he collided with a teammate. Eric Lindros won't return until four weeks from now, wonderful news for that family considering that Brett Lindros' career was ended by multiple concussions. Toronto Maple Leafs tough guy Nick Kypreos hasn't played since September. Phoenix Coyotes defenseman Jim Johnson seems headed to retirement, another casualty of post-concussion-syndrome (Allen 15C).

According to this article, the league made sure that one thousand current and prospective players had brain scans. Also, at the beginning of the season, the NHL agreed on a rule that said that players who enter the league must wear helmets that meet the required safety standards. The problem is that most players, particularly veterans from the time when concussions were a rarity, don't abide by the rule and yet are accepted by the league.

Probably the most famous of these players is New York Ranger Wayne Gretzky, often called the greatest player of all time. He wears what Brian Burke, vice-president and NHL director of operations, calls, "a cereal box with a strap" (Allen 15C).

There have been hits that have occurred this year that even the strongest helmet would not have helped. This occurred in the case of Eric Lindros, one of the league's biggest players. Doctors have said that Lindros could have decreased the effects of the bodycheck thrown on him by Pittsburgh's Darius Kasparitis, one of the league's toughest hitters, if he had worn a mouthguard. Mouthguards stabilize the jaw and absorb some of the shock. This season, more players have begun to use them, but it still may take some time to catch on.

What role will technology play in all of this? There is no doubt that technology will improve both helmets and mouthguards. Nevertheless there are still two remaining controversies. First, trying to force all players to adopt helmets and mouthguards would run up against the National Hockey League Players Association which argues that players should have the right to take risks. The second controversy concerns the

overall game. Technology has made the game much different than it was ten or fifteen years ago. With improved diets, physical training, and stronger, more durable equipment, players have gotten much bigger. Today, the average NHL team is over six feet in height and over two hundred pounds in weight. Teams play a tighter, more defensive game where contact is inevitable because skating room has decreased. More people are getting hit, and hit harder.

What should the NHL do? Many people have suggested bigger ice surfaces and the abandonment of the off-sides rule (which will open up the game space). But to do so would mean that contact and bodychecking would be limited. Since those aspects of the game are so basic to hockey, many would not accept such changes. I think, however, that making the ice surface larger is a great idea. International hockey competitions have bigger ice surfaces. The game is fun and fast, and there is still hitting. I'm also in favor of the rule about safety-regulated helmets. If they can't make every active player do it, then every new player who comes into the league should wear one. Eventually in a few years, everyone will be wearing them. On the other hand, mouthguards are often distracting and should be left up to the player. Moreover, some players simply cannot tolerate them during the game.

Two other controversies in the NHL deal with other aspects of the technological revolution. In 1995, the FOX Network purchased the rights to show NHL games during the year. In the middle of the season, the executives of the company announced that they had designed a chip that can be placed inside the puck, and from an outside source, allow the puck to "glow" during the game so that fans can see it easier. Another added feature of the puck was that all shots that had speeds of 90 mph or more on them would have a red trailing tail following them, almost as if they were on fire. The "Foxtrax" puck was ridiculed in the press by many of hockey's traditionalists, but the puck did win over some fans, particularly kids and others who admitted that they often lost the puck when it traveled at high speeds. Even those who never really had trouble seeing the puck found Foxtrax to be helpful in viewing long shots from the point and in crowds of players. But after many different variations (which included altering the color and getting rid of the glowing tail), the idea was discontinued for this season.

Another controversy concerns the use of multiple video replay. Video replay is often overused when trying to decide whether a player was in the crease. According to the rulebook, a video replay can be used to: review goals in which there was a goal scored off a skate intentionally, a goal scored by a stick above the crossbar or "high stick," a goal scored by someone's hand, and to check if the puck completely passed the goal line or not. It can also be used by teams to determine which players were responsible for severe injuries. This often results in suspensions. The controversy that arises from the use of replays is that it takes too much time away from a game already frequently stopped. Moreover, an over reliance on video takes away from the referee's ability to call the game as he sees it. Many say that if you're going to call for a video replay, why have a referee call the game? Sports such as basketball and base-

ball do not allow video replays. And football voted to get rid of it two seasons ago. Despite these problems, video replay lets you know for sure about a call. Why should teams lose games due to a referee's missed call?

Today the NHL has a camera set up inside the goal that tells the whole story of what happened. It can tell if a puck crosses the goal line completely, and it even allows goal judges to tell if shots really went in, but bounced out so fast that the goal judges may have thought that the puck hit the post. This incident occurred in last year's playoffs. It was the first round at Madison Square Garden. The series involved the Florida Panthers and the New York Rangers. It was game three with the series tied at one game apiece. The teams had played to a tie after regulation, which meant the game would be decided in overtime. About halfway through overtime, at about the 10-minute mark, Wayne Gretzky sent a cross-ice pass to teammate Esa Tikkanen, who one-timed the shot on goal. The shot was dead on, but it appeared that it had hit the crossbar because the puck had bounced back out and into play. The crowd groaned in disappointment, and even the announcer thought the puck had gone off the post. But Esa had his arms up in the air in jubilation thinking he had just scored. The referee, however, had other thoughts and allowed play to resume. After the play went dead when the puck was flung into the stands, Esa asked him for a video replay. He was the only one in the building who saw the puck go in. The goal judge did not put on the red light to signal a goal, and no one saw otherwise. But the camera agreed with Esa. What the video displayed was Tikkanen's shot beating the goaltender and hitting the iron post past the goalline, and then bouncing out as quick as it had entered. In fact, the puck actually nicked the camera, and since the camera is completely in the goal, there could be no doubt that the puck had gone in. The Rangers went on to win the game. It is for this reason that I am strongly in favor of video replay technology in hockey.

There has been a lot of talk about technology and how it has changed the game in both positive and negative ways. These changes have allowed hockey to compete in a sports market where it is still considered a "fourth sport" behind football, baseball, and basketball. Now in the 1990s the sport is receiving more exposure. In a recent issue of *Maclean's*, James Deacon reports:

The biggest excitement in the NHL many be about the fortunes of the league itself. Like a hot prospect with a couple of seasons under his belt, the league appears ready to come into its own. It has secured long-term labor peace with its players and game officials and signed a five-year network TV deal with Los Angeles-based Fox Broadcasting for coverage in the United States. And it is drawing fans from the In-line skating boom. . . Since 1992, the NHL's merchandise sales have nearly doubled, to more than 81 billion annually. . . The league has 18 corporate sponsors, including Nike (Deacon 62).

Nike, which sponsors Detroit Red Wing all-star Sergei Federov, has played a key role in television and magazine advertising for the NHL. When people see Nike's support for hockey, they respond. Access to the internet has also helped to advance hockey. At any time of the day, fans can log on to [www.nhl.com](http://www.nhl.com) to find the latest stats and scores. This web site allows fans to chat with players and visit team homepages; and it even has interactive games, trivia, and video highlights. Satellite companies such as Direct TV and Primestar have packages which give access to games from throughout the league. Every night fans can see a wide variety of games from all across the country. It allows the fans to see all of the league superstars and best players live on television.

It is clear that technology has significantly influenced the world of sports. These effects are especially obvious in the National Hockey League. Dating back to the first mask used by Jacques Plante, controversies associated with new technology have directly influenced the development of the sport. These changes will no doubt continue to be controversial, but hockey will only advance if it takes advantage of technological developments such as new multi-media equipment and computers. Hockey always seems to be skating on thin ice, but it is the ever changing technology of the sport that has allowed it to grow and prosper.

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